

## **Stranger Endings** by **darthstormer**

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**Summary:** A Stranger Things Choose Your Own Adventure. Set at the end of Season 1, can you bring Mike and El's story to a happy ending?

## 1. Introduction

We all remember how season one came to a close. Dr. Brenner and the bad men found them at the school, the demogorgon was drawn in by all the blood and El pulled herself into the Upside-Down while trying to destroy the beast once and for all. In the aftermath, as he made his nightly calls into the void, Mike couldn't help but wonder if there were some way things could have gone differently that night. What if they had run just a little faster? Or taken a left instead of a right as they raced down the halls?

Ready to see if you can guide the story in another direction? Head over to Chapter 2 to get started. Need a little more explanation? Read on.

If this is your first choose your own adventure story (or if its been a few years, or decades) here's how this all works. Our story begins on Chapter 2. As you read, you'll come to a point where you must make a decision on behalf of our heroes. Each choice will direct you to the appropriate chapter, where the story will continue based on the path you have chosen. Be sure to jump to the chapters indicated, as the story will make very little sense if you try to read the chapters in order.

Not all paths are created equal. Down some roads you will reach the end in just three chapters, in others it will take you five to reach your conclusion; in general, each branch will run about the length of a normal one-shot. This story features seven endings, some happy, some sad, and one where I got a little carried away and just kept writing. If you get lost, there is a spoiler-free map in Chapter 16.

So grab an Eggo and some chocolate pudding, head on over to Chapter 2, and let's see where we wind up.

### **Edit - Apology:**

**I apologize to those of you who happen to have an author follow turned on for me. I see the site sent out notices for every chapter as I was attaching them. I was hoping it would consolidate, or only send out an initial notice since they went up within**

minutes, but I guess not.

### **Authors Note:**

For those that have made it all the way to the bottom of this introduction, I just wanted to take a quick minute and give another sincere thank you to the members of this community. Like so many others, I found my way here at the end of season two, when I couldn't bear to let the story be over. After pouring over the countless works by some amazing authors, I decided to try my hand at a story. The overwhelming support I've received from both readers and other authors has truly been life-changing and I am forever grateful.

## 2. Chapter 2

### Hawkins Middle School Cafeteria

**Saturday November 12, 1983 - 9:50 PM**

Mike Wheeler sat back in stunned silence, scarcely believing what he had just done. One minute, he had been rambling on about the Snow Ball and why it wasn't something you went to with your sister. He had desperately tried to figure out how to explain to El that it was something you went to with someone you liked, maybe even more than friends. The next moment, he had suddenly found his lips pressed softly to hers. It was over in an instant but it he knew it was something he would remember the rest of his life.

It was completely out of character for him to make such a bold move, but then again, pretty much everything he had done since he met her was like that. Now, studying her face for some kind of reaction, he started to second-guess himself. Did she even know what a kiss was? Did she understand what it meant? It's not like that was something they would have taught her about in the lab, but he thought maybe it's something deeper, that you just understand.

All the fear and doubt in his mind washed away as a shy smile crept across her face. He hadn't scared her away, and just maybe, that meant she felt the same way about him. He knew he needed to say something, but what? His mind was drawing a total blank.

The moment was broken by headlights sweeping across the cafeteria windows.

"Nancy," he said to her, standing up from his chair. "Hold on, I'll be right back,"

He started to walk toward the door, heading out to the parking lot to meet them and make sure his sister was alright, but a thought crept into his head. What if it was someone else?

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If you think Mike should run out front to meet Nancy in the parking

lot, go to Chapter 3

If you think Mike should take a quick look out the cafeteria windows first, go to Chapter 10

### 3. Chapter 3

Mike decided he was overreacting after their run from the bad men that afternoon. No one knew they were here, and it was far down the list of places anyone would guess. He ran out of the cafeteria and down the hall, anxious and on-edge as he went. If Nancy and Jonathan were back, that had to mean they had already killed the demogorgon. With the creature gone, just maybe that meant all this was over. They could get El safely into hiding somewhere, Hopper and Joyce would come back with Will, and life would go back to normal. As he pushed through the doors and stepped out into the parking lot, all those hopeful feelings washed away in a cold sweat. It wasn't a single car pulling to a stop next to the building, but many; cars full of suited agents and military trucks full of soldiers.

Mike turned and sprinted back into the building, desperate to reach El before the bad men could. The whole way there, he kept repeating to himself that they had to get her out; everything would be alright if they could just get her out of the building.

"Guys, they found us!" Mike shouted as he ran back into the room.

For a moment, the other three stared back at him from the table where they were gathered around a stack of pudding cans. It didn't register at first who Mike could mean; surely not the lab.

"We have to go!" he shouted, snapping them out of their stupor. "Now!"

The group took off through the maze of hallways, trying desperately to reach an exit. Each time they neared a door, a fresh group of soldiers were approaching, guns drawn, and they had to turn and double back. Mike knew they were quickly running out of options, but they pressed onward, refusing to give up. They rounded a corner and came face to face with yet another group. This time, though, they were pinned in by a group coming up from behind; they needed some kind of a miracle if they were going to get out.

Time seemed to slow as El ducked her head, casting a firm gaze at the agents gathered in front of her. At first, Mike wondered why they

had stopped moving forward and then he spotted the blood beginning to run from their eyes. She was stopping them, just as she had with Troy, though Mike could tell this went far beyond embarrassing them. El have every intention of killing the agents, and he found he felt no sympathy for the people who had abused and neglected her.

All at once, the agents dropped, their minds utterly destroyed. A second latter, El fell too, drained from the exertion. Mike rushed to her side, desperately calling her name and trying to wake her. He had seen her exhausted before, but this was something far worse. He was so focused on El, he hadn't noticed Dr. Brenner himself step into the hallway until he ordered them to step away from her.

In spite of their protests, the boys were pulled back from El all the same, restrained as they fought to get away. Brenner stepped forward and knelt at El's side, waking her up and quietly whispering comforting promises of taking her home and getting her well again. To someone who didn't know better, it almost looked like a tender moment between a father and daughter, but Mike knew better. He fought off a wave of revulsion at the blatant, manipulative act. El, too, was having none of it, and she tried to weakly twist away from him.

The peaceful moment was brought to an end as the wall began to crumble away, the demogorgon fighting its way through. As Nancy had predicted, it was drawn in by the copious pools of blood surrounding the fallen agents. Those still standing raised their guns and opened fire on the creature, though it moved too fast for them to get off effective shots. The hall was cramped and there were too few of them to put up a solid offense.

Seizing on the momentary confusion, the boys rushed back to El's side. Dustin quickly gathered her into his arms and the boys took off down the hallway in a run, putting as much distance as they could between themselves and the firefight. Risking one quick glance over his shoulder, Mike saw the demogorgon leap at Dr. Brenner, tackling him to the ground with a sickening thud. He could only hope the fight proved fatal for both monsters.

As they neared the end of the hall, they had to make yet another

decision on which way to go. The doors straight ahead were no good; reinforcements outside were approaching, the beams of their flashlights cutting streaks across the windows. To the left, they could try for the gym. To the right, another wing of classrooms and hopefully, an unguarded exit.

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If you think they should take a left and get out through the gym, go to Chapter 6

If you think they should head to the right and try their luck down the wing of classrooms, go to Chapter 4



## 4. Chapter 4

As they reached the intersection, Mike chanced a quick glance to the right and could hear more soldiers were approaching from that direction. They seemed to still be far down the hall, and the next exit was only a few doors away. He decided the risk was worth it, knowing the first rounds of soldiers had already come from the direction of the gym, and took a hard right down the corridor.

Almost as soon as they passed the first classroom door, he knew it had been a mistake. Agents were rounding the corner at the far end and would reach them well before they made it to the outside door. The firefight was also moving quickly down another hallway off to their right and they were pinned in again. Seizing on the confusion, he decided hiding rather than running might be their best option. Ripping open the door to one of the science classrooms, he led the others inside, Lucas quickly shutting the door behind them. They ran to the back of the room and laid El down on one of the lab tables.

Mustering whatever strength she had left, El forced her eyes open and looked up at Mike. He held her hands in his own, and quietly reassured her it was going to be alright. They would be going home soon, and she could have all the Eggos she wanted, and they'd go to the SnowBall together.

"Promise?" she whispered

"I promise," he confirmed.

She let a small smile drift across her lips, wanting so badly to believe him. She knew he wasn't lying, just to make her feel better, but he might have been lying to himself, disastrously overestimating their chances. There was only one way out of this that she could see. It wasn't a decision she made lightly, and in the end she wasn't even sure she was strong enough to pull it off, but she had to try all the same. If it kept the people she cared about safe - if it kept Mike safe - it was a sacrifice she was ready to make.

As she expected, the demogorgon came crashing through the door moments later, the lights overhead flickering to punctuate its fury.

The boys pulled out the wrist-rocket; a futile effort but one that bought time for her to take a deep breath and climb down from the table. She flung the creature as hard as she could, pinning it to the wall at the front of the room. Her eyes were a burning red as she marched slowly forward, shutting out the sounds around her, shrinking the world to just the two of them; predator and prey.

Mike stepped forward, realizing what she was about to do and attempted to stop her. She threw him back across the room, harder than she intended, but desperate to keep him out of harms way. She could feel him struggling against her grasp, but she held tight to him. She came to a stop just feet from the demogorgon, who flailed desperately at her, fighting to break free. Hoping it wouldn't shatter her resolve, El chanced one last look back at the boy who had come to mean everything to her, watching her now with desperate tears in his eyes.

"Goodbye Mike," she sadly whispered. She held his gaze a moment, before turning back and letting the rage fill her again. "No more," she snarled as she reached out and began to tear at the creature that had haunted her since the day she had found it in the void.

"Not like this," Mike muttered to himself, slumped at the back of the room. Heartbreak tore through him as he watched the end beginning to unfold. He twisted again, struggling against her grip, still pinning him to the cabinet. In spite of the effort tearing the demogorgon apart, she still dedicated enough strength to keep him out of harms way. As the cloud of debris began to swirl around her, he could feel her grip loosen. He gave another twist hard to one side, trying to break free.

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To have El hold him until the very end, pinned safely against the cabinets, go to Chapter 5

To have Mike overcome her grip and break free, go to Chapter 7

## 5. Chapter 5

Only when the cloud had El fully concealed in its swirling black destruction, did Mike feel the invisible hand holding him back gently fade away. It was immediately replaced by a burning knot of loss in his chest. He could see the front of the room clearly and she was nowhere to be found, but his mind refused to accept it.

"El?" he yelled, fighting back tears as he ran to where she had just been standing moments before. "El, where are you? Eleven?"

It was a long night and an even longer day to come, but Mike passed it in a bleary fog. It was nearly 30 minutes before a fresh round of soldiers, doing a sweep of the school, finally found the boys still huddled in the classroom. They were led out of the school through hallways littered with blood and debris, and finally passed off to the paramedics outside to check them over. Mike could vaguely remember his parents showing up at one point, and falling into his mother's arms. They were released to go home, but he couldn't recall anything about the silent drive through town. The house was already full of agents when they got there, and he was grilled for hours about what had happened.

At first, he could barely get through the story, reliving every detail from the point they got to the school, to the last moments when El tore the creature out of this world. The second time through was harder somehow, peeling the wounds open further. By his third recitation, sadness was giving way to anger as he realized they were trying to find cracks in his story, getting him to admit El was still around, hidden somewhere.

"I don't know where she is," he spat, defiant anger barely masking the hurt of admitting it. "And even if I did, I'd never tell you."

He didn't want to believe - couldn't let himself believe - she was actually gone. At one point, in a moment of delirious exhaustion, he could even have sworn he saw her at the window, but he knew that was only wishful figments of a broken heart. The agents interviewing him must have read the look on his face, and a few were sent outside to search, but they came back unsuccessful.

Finally, close to dawn, the agents left the Wheeler house, satisfied they had all they were going to get. His parents tried to order Mike to bed, exhausted themselves, but he insisted on going to the hospital to check on Will. Too tired to argue, the family piled back into the car and headed out one more time. Dustin and Lucas confirmed they had been similarly interviewed by agents from the lab, though not nearly as long. It was clear the agents felt Mike was the best chance of getting to El, which left him all the more determined to make sure they never came close to finding her.

The sun was already gone from the sky again when Will finally woke up and they were allowed to see him. The relief of knowing his best friend was alive and going to be alright managed to paint a smile on Mike's face for a few minutes, until the conversation turned to El. There was a lightness and joy in him as they all took turns telling Will about how she had helped to find him. Inevitably, though, the story came around to the end, and she was gone all over again. He fought through for as long as he could, but eventually Mike had to leave the room, tears threatening to start all over again.

Nancy finally found Mike in the darkened corner of an empty hallway, and he had no fight left in him when Ted gently ushered him back toward the car. Home and in bed, exhaustion beat out grief and pulled him under, putting an end to the longest day of his life; the day he lost the girl he loved. They had only just met, but he knew already that he loved her, which was why it hurt as bad as it did. He slept through the night and long into the next day. School was closed, under the cover story of a small fire over the weekend and cleanup that had to take place, but he knew there was no way he could face those hallways anyhow. Instead, he buried himself deep in blankets and tried to shut out the world, willing it all to go away.

Late that afternoon, Mike made his way down to the basement and set about putting the blanket fort back together for El. Somehow, he knew she would find her way back to him, and he wanted everything to be ready when she did. It might be a few days, maybe weeks, but he knew she would come back, and he would be waiting for her with open arms.

"She's just hiding," he thought. "Waiting until it's safe to come out."

It was a possibility he could live with, at least for now. It might be tough, but she was strong; probably the strongest person he'd ever met. The other possibilities, he pushed out of his mind, refusing to breath life into the idea he might never see her again.

Instead, as he worked, he thought about all the things he wanted to tell her, things he hadn't had the chance to before. He wanted to tell her how sorry he was, that he couldn't protect her when the time came. To tell her thank you, for finding Will and giving him the chance to make it home alive. To tell her just how much he missed her already, not believe it was possible to hurt this much for someone he'd only just met. He wanted her to know he was waiting and that he understood if she had to stay away for just a little while, until it was safe again.

He stared at the finished blanket fort, deciding it might be even better than the first one he had built her, when an idea came to him. It was so outlandish, he almost pushed it aside, chastising himself for chasing after false hopes. All the same, he took a seat inside, among the comforting safety of cotton walls and picked up his SuperComm, tuning it purposefully to seldom-used channel 11. He took a deep, shaky breath and pressed the transmit button on the side.

"El? Are you there?" He let go, filling the room with quiet static, before going on. "It's Mike. Today is Monday, and it's been one day since you went away. I'm here..."

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**The End**

## 6. Chapter 6

As they reached the intersection, Mike chanced a quick glance to the right and could hear more soldiers were approaching from that direction, drawn in by the sound fight behind them. Mike pivoted to the left, heading for the gym, with Dustin close behind and Lucas pulling up the rear. It felt like their best chance to make it out of the building, but he found himself beginning to question every decision as they desperately sought an exit.

Reaching the doors to the gym, Mike and Lucas each ripped one open and they all ran through, barely breaking stride. Halfway across, a fresh wave of troops came through the doors on the far side, summoned by frantic radio calls. Both groups slowed to a stop, unsure what to make of the other. The kids tried to gauge how much of a threat the new men posed, while the soldiers eyed the group, unsure of which child was supposed to be the threat they were there to deal with; none of them particularly looked like the dangerous super-soldier Brenner had briefed them about.

The quiet beat lasted for only a moment as the fight behind them poured in from the hallway. Soldiers dropped as the demogorgon leaped from one man to another, sinking its razor-sharp claws deep. The other soldiers, firing on the retreat, could only land a few good shots as it paused before moving on to its next victim. Thanks to an incredibly tough hide, even the shots that found their target were having little effect. The creature was bleeding, but also running on raw, primal anger as it tore its way through those that were trying to stop it.

As the men who had just entered the gym joined into the firefight, the kids moved back, inching their way toward the door that would get them outside. Before they made it much closer, the fight shifted, putting both gunfire and the monster between them and the doors. They found themselves pinned back against the wall and unable to reach any possible exit. Dustin carefully laid El down, running out of strength to carry her any further. Mike knelt quietly at her side, taking one of her hands in his own and trying his best to reassure her it was going to be alright.

El looked up at Mike through tired eyes, her head throbbing from the exertion back in the hallway. Chaos was unfolding around them and the concussive sounds of gunfire left her nerves rattled. The soldiers were woefully unprepared for the creature they were facing and El knew she was going to have to step in. They couldn't stop her, and they wouldn't be able to stop the demogorgon, either.

"Mike," El whispered, barely audible above the battle behind them.

Mike leaned closer, straining to hear her. She gripped his hand tighter and pulled herself to a sitting position, fighting back a wave of dizzying nausea, before bowing her head forward, her forehead coming to rest against his.

"Goodbye, Mike," she whispered sadly.

Tear burned at the edges of her eyes and she fought them back, knowing if she let them fall she might lose her nerve. Her gut told her she had one chance to stop the creature for good, but she would probably be destroyed in the process. She didn't want to leave this world that she'd only just discovered, but if it meant the people she cared about were safe, it was a decision she could accept.

Pressing back against the wall, El got her feet underneath her body and stood shakily, adrenaline starting to fuel her movements again. Mike stared deep into her eyes, offering a steadying hand and desperately trying to riddle out what she meant. Why goodbye? She couldn't possibly mean...

El took a step forward, willing herself closer to the fight.

"El, stop," Mike shouted, taking a step after her, desperate to talk her out of whatever she was about to do.

Without looking, she flung him back against the wall and pinned him there. It was a harder throw than she intended, but she knew if she turned and saw his pleading eyes, or felt the reassuring touch of his fingers, she would talk herself out of it, and they would all die together.

Turning to look at the noise behind them, Dustin and Lucas were

startled to find El moving quickly toward them, a rage building in her eyes. Behind her, Mike struggled against the force holding him to the wall, tears barely contained.

"El, what are you doing?" Dustin asked, stepping in front of her.

Reaching out with her mind, she nudged him off to one side, far gentler than she had been with Mike. Her eyes fell on Lucas, and she could see he understood. With a small, sad nod of his head, he stepped to one side to let her by. He still felt terrible about how he had treated her in the beginning. He had called her a liar and a traitor, when all she wanted to do was help them find their friend. Now, she was about to pay the ultimate price to defend the people she cared about, a list that included him right near the top, and there was nothing he could do for her.

"Goodbye El," he whispered as she stepped by. "I'm sorry."

El lowered her head as she moved forward, preparing herself for a final showdown. Still keeping Mike pinned back out of harms way, she gathered the rest of her strength, judging the right moment to strike. As the demogorgon leaped off one body, lunging toward its next victim, she stretched out with her mind and grabbed it, flinging the creature hard against the far wall. It let out a horrendous shriek of anger as it struggled to break free of her grasp, but El held it firm to the wall, continuing forward. When it found it couldn't shake loose the unseen bonds holding it in place, it tried instead to pull itself back through to the Upside-Down. She had anticipated the move, and countered the creatures attempts, binding it firmly to this world; she refused to let it get away from her, whatever direction it tried to move.

The remaining soldiers looked quickly at one another, bewildered by what they were seeing. Unconsciously, a few stepped to the side, opening a hole in their formation for her to pass through. She figured they too understood what she intended, and as she walked between them, she pulled the last of her focus off Mike and began tearing away at the very fabric of the creature. For their part, after another quick glance from man to man, the soldiers formed up to either side of El, keeping pace with the girl as she moved forward. With the thing finally incapacitated, they were able to land shots that soon proved



effective.

Twenty feet back from the creature, El felt a hand come to rest on her shoulder, and only then did it register that the whole line had moved forward with her. She flicked her eyes to one side and then the other, careful not to drop her attention from the creature, and realized the soldiers were finally gaining the upper hand. She stopped tearing at the beast and doubled her efforts holding it in place, letting the guns handle the actual destructive work. Men passed spare magazines up and down the line, as their neighbor's supply ran out, and it ultimately took every round they had, but with a final howl of rage, El felt the life drain out of the demogorgon and she let the body crumple to the floor.

Even after she released him, Mike had hung back from the fight. Seeing El wasn't still set on sacrificing herself, he stayed out of her way and let her do what needed to be done, ready to be there for her the moment she needed him. As the demogorgon dropped to the ground, Mike charged forward, already recognizing the signs El was also about to fall. He reached her just in time, catching her as her knees buckled, and lowered her carefully to the floor, cradling her head and whispering comforting praise.

"It's okay, El, I've got you," he soothed, gently wiping away the blood pouring from her nose. "You did amazing, You saved us."

The few men left standing looked around, trying to make some sense of everything that had just happened. A few ventured back into the hallway to check for survivors and returned minutes later having found none. Dr. Brenner was dead. His agents from the lab were dead. The chain of command had fallen to pieces in the short time they had been at the school. Eyes were cast about the gathered group, checking ranks and figuring out who was now in charge of this mess. Each man quietly prayed there was at least one person who outranked him in the group, no one wanting the responsibility.

"Looks like its me," announced Sergeant Roberts, stepping forward and answering the question no one verbalized.

He looked around at the carnage and destruction, and then at the barely-conscious girl who had saved them all, laying on the gym floor

surrounded protectively by her friends. He knew she was the one they had been sent to retrieve, but he could not in good conscience send her back to that place. None of the rank-and-file men assigned to the lab had ever known what the real experiments were, being performed at the lab, and this was not the kind of thing he had enlisted to be a part of. She was just a child; one who had no business taking on international espionage and fighting inter-dimensional monsters. She deserved a normal life, going to school, hanging out with friends, and giving her father heartburn over the fact that all her friends appear to be boys. That said, he had orders to follow and severe repercussions to face if he refused. It was a tough decision either way, but he had made it.

"Everyone's attention," he shouted, silencing the murmured conversations around the gym. "We were sent here tonight on a recovery mission. Property from the lab had been stolen and our job was to bring it back. We've all seen what the girl is capable of, and the importance of getting her where she belongs."

The boys listened closely with mounting dread as he spoke, realizing the soldiers were about to drag her away, and there wasn't a thing they could do to stop them. Mike inched closer to El, still meaning with every fiber of his being what he said before, that they would have to kill him before he'd let them get to her.

"Unfortunately, it would appear our mission was a failure. Tragically, in the midst of the fight, the creature got a hold of the girl and tore through her, as it did so many of our fallen brothers. She did not survive. Does everyone concur, they saw her fall during the firefight?"

He scanned the gathered few with tense anticipation, watching one man after another come to the same conclusions he had. "Yes sir," one affirmed, followed closely by another. One by one, all the men assembled confirmed their agreement that experiment Eleven had perished in the fight.

Sergeant Roberts walked over to the boys, who understood what they had heard but still watched him approach with wary skepticism. He crouched down and gently took hold of El's hand.

"Good work, young lady. Thank you. And, I'm sorry," he said, softly. Then, turning to the boys, "Get her out of here, somewhere safe. Take care of her."

El smiled weakly at the soldier, before seeking Mike's face again. "Home?" she asked, softly.

Mike responded with a gentle nod. "Home."

They helped her back to her feet, and with Mike supporting her on one side and Lucas on the other, the four made their way quietly out of the gym as the soldiers began the process of dealing with the scene. They kept to the tree-line as they started off the school property, ducking into the shadows as emergency vehicles began to converge. A little further along, they came across Nancy, Jonathan, and to their surprise, Steve Harrington, parked off on the shoulder watching the scene unfold. Nancy rushed forward and pulled Mike and El together into a hug, relieved both were alright.

It was a tight fit, but they all managed to cram into Jonathan's car and drove back to the Byers' house to rest and to wait. El was asleep almost immediately as they made their way through town, and this time it was Mike who carried her inside, strengthened by the knowledge that it was all over, and laid her out in Will's bed. He knew his best friend wouldn't mind, and El deserved something more comfortable than the living room couch. He pulled over the chair from Will's desk, and though he dozed off and on, he stayed right by her side the rest of the night.

Sometime late the next morning, they made their way out to the kitchen when El was feeling up to a little food. Joyce and Hopper came back to the house to rest, while Jonathan took a shift staying with Will at the hospital. Sitting around the dining-room table, they discussed what their next move was. While Hopper agreed that El was probably safe with Brenner out of the picture, she needed to stay hidden for a while until they could be sure.

"They've got the Wheeler's under plenty of surveillance," he confirmed, "so that's out."

Mike was disappointed that his promises of home would have to wait

a while longer, but he was still determined to see them through.

"She'll stay here," Joyce announced, matter-of-factly.

Hopper threw her a skeptical look, questioning whether that would work.

"What?" she asked, defensively. "I suppose you were planning on hauling her off to your granddad's old cabin out in the woods?" She saw the crushed look come over Hopper and realized she had guessed right. "Really, Hop? That drafty old cabin is no place for her. Anyone other than you making the trek out there would raise attention, so she'd be all by herself. Here, the boy's can come and go as they please to visit without anyone batting an eye. If she has to be cooped up inside, she at least needs to be able to see other people."

She turned to El, who had been trying to take it all in, still in shock that she wasn't going back to the lab. "We'd have to rearrange a few things, and it would be a tight fit, but would you like to stay here? With me and Will and Jonathan?"

El looked to Mike, her face silently asking if it was a good idea. He gave her a big smile and a gentle nod. She looked back at Joyce with a soft smile of her own.

"Yes."

"That settles it," Joyce said, brightly. "From now on, your home is right here with us, for as long as you want."

"Home," El repeated, softly.

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**The End**

## 7. Chapter 7

"Not like this," Mike thought again, as he watched the cloud slowly billowing around her.

The harder she tore at the demogorgon, the more she lost her grip pinning Mike to the cabinets. The room was a torrent of sound as the creature howled in anger and El screamed in a primal rage as she ripped apart the monster pinned against the chalkboard. In a roar of determination, Mike broke free and kicked off hard against the cabinet, sprinting toward her. He had no idea if he could reach her before it was too late, but he knew he had to try. Time seemed to slow as he charged ahead.

The cloud nearly surrounded her as he ran. Ten feet away, he stepped to the right, knowing he had to grab her from the side, or he'd wind up slamming her right into the creature instead. Six feet, he could just make out her face through the fog. Her eyes were red, blazing with a fiery hatred; she didn't see him coming. Three feet and he was in the cloud, the dark ash burning his eyes but he didn't care; all he could think was getting her out. Two feet. One foot.

He felt the impact and threw his arms around her, refusing to let her slip from his grasp. They tumbled toward the floor and he held her tight. Time seemed to slow even more as they fell onward, far longer than it should have taken to reach the cold tile. Finally, mercifully, they hit. The air was slammed from his chest as his back made contact with the ground. An instant later, El landed on his chest, driving the rest of the breath from his lungs as everything went black.

He couldn't be sure how long he lay there on the floor - it could have been a minute or an hour - but he suddenly came around, coughing hard to clear the thick fluid running down his throat. His head throbbed and it took a few seconds before he remembered where he was.

"El," he called out weakly, his voice hoarse and a pressure in his chest making it difficult to draw enough breath.

He felt around, his head still too heavy to move, and realize she was

still laying across him, not moving. Forgetting his own pain, Mike carefully slipped out from under her and rolled her onto her side.

"El," Mike called again, giving her shoulders a gentle shake.

Her eyes fluttered open, washed clear of the burning rage that had painted them moments before. "Mike?" she croaked, before falling into a coughing fit of her own, that same milking fluid clogging her throat. Her whole body hurt and all she wanted to do was shut her eyes and close out the world again. Still, she forced herself to keep them open, focusing on the boy staring back at her with loving concern.

"Gone?" she asked, when she managed to catch her breath.

Only then did Mike look around, expecting to find Dustin and Lucas, and whatever remained of the creature. Instead, he was horrified to find they were alone in a dark, vine-covered mirror of the classroom where they had been moments before. He had never seen the place, having only Will's shaky description over the radio, but it only took one glance at the room to know they were now in the Upside-Down.

"Yeah, it's gone," he answered, shakily, trying to keep down the panic slowly welling up inside.

El slowly sat up, fighting the ache running through every inch of her body, and looked slowly around the room. She came to the same conclusion as Mike, and turned back to him, her eyes cast guiltily down.

"I'm sorry," she apologized quietly. She had tried so hard to keep him safe, and now she had drug him down into this dead world.

"El, it's okay," Mike soothed, pulling her into his arms. "You stopped the demogorgon. And we'll be alright. We'll find a way back out."

Hesitantly, she looked back up at him and found a reassuring smile painted across his face.

"Come on," he continued, standing and then helping her to her feet. "Let's go home."

She smiled back, thinking of the promises of home he had made back in the cafeteria, and the hope that it might still be possible. Together they walked out of the classroom and down the hallway toward the place the demogorgon had broken through the wall. Mike had a suspicion the opening might still be there, and just maybe, they could get back through that way. Sure enough, as they rounded the corner, a faint red glow illuminated the jagged opening and they both quickened their pace.

They peered carefully through the thin, rubbery membrane covering the hole and were both reassured and frustrated by what they found on the other side. It was definitely an opening to the Right-Side-Up, but the hallway was still crawling with soldiers dealing with the aftermath of the battle that had taken place. Bodies of the fallen were being carefully bagged and carried away. Men from the lab in hazmat suits were collecting samples and taking photographs all around the scene.

Mike and El quickly ducked back when one of them turned and shone a flashlight their direction, through the portal. It was safe to assume, if they could see out, the men in the hall on the other side could see back. As they waited for the light to pass, Mike noticed the edges of the portal very slowly receding, leaving repaired wall in their wake; they had a little time still before it closed, but they couldn't wait forever. Quietly, he pointed out the discovery to El, who nodded in understanding.

After withdrawing a little way down the corridor so they could talk, Mike laid out the options running through his head.

"We have a little while before that portal closes. We could wait it out, and try to go through when the soldiers leave. Or we could go out there," he said, nodding toward the door at the end of the hall. "The Chief and Mrs. Byers might still be out there looking for Will, and we could go back out with them."

El stared back silently, wary of both options but knowing there probably weren't better choices either.

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To wait it out until the hallway is empty, go to Chapter 8

To head out into the Upside-Down and try to find Hopper, go to Chapter 9



## 8. Chapter 8

Finally, Mike decided it was best to wait it out at the school. As much as he hated sitting there watching the edges of the portal slowly closing in on themselves, he knew it was still safer than venturing out into an unknown that had nearly killed Will. If things got desperate, they could always go through and take their chances with the men on the other side.

They sat with their backs leaned against the wall, El's head resting on Mike's shoulder. She was beyond exhausted from the day and gratefully closed her eyes when he offered to keep watch. From their vantage point, he couldn't make out the people on the other side clearly, but he could still see the shadows as they walked past and heard their muffled voices as they spoke. He knew he couldn't let himself fall asleep, despite his own exhaustion now that the adrenaline had all washed away, so he busied himself by thinking through where they could go once they were on the other side. He had to find her someplace safe to hide until things calmed down. Finally, Mike realized he hadn't seen any movement at the opening for several minutes and thought it might be time to go.

"El," Mike whispered, gently rousing her from sleep. "I'm going to check the portal."

She nodded sleepily and sat up, stretching her stiff limbs. Mike crept quietly over to the opening and looked through, hoping for an empty hallway. The opening was still big enough for them to get through, but only just. They would have to make their move soon whether things were clear or not. He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the corridor on the other side was empty in every direction.

"Time to go," he said, beckoning El over to join him.

Once she was by his side, Mike took a deep breath and reached out with a hesitant hand until it made contact with the cold, rubbery skin covering the opening. He pressed forward and after stretching nearly the length of his forearm, the covering tore, giving them clear passage back to the world where they belonged. As they got back to their feet, they both jumped at the sound of voices somewhere down

the hallway.

"This way," Mike whispered, indicating the short hall to their left.

El nodded and followed quickly, keeping close to his side, as they made their way to a door leading outside. After checking that the coast was clear, they pushed their way through and took off quickly across the field toward the dark safety of the woods beyond. Once they were far enough in to be out of sight from the school, Mike slowed so they could catch their breath.

"We have to get you somewhere safe, to hide out for a little bit," Mike said as he began to lay out the plan he had formulated while keeping watch. "My parents house isn't safe anymore, at least not for now; I think the bad men will be watching the place. I think I know somewhere we can go, but it's a little bit of a walk to get there. Do you feel alright for that?"

El thought for a moment before answering, "Yes" with a small smile. She was still tired, but the quick nap in the hall while they were waiting had helped.

"Great," Mike smiled in return, "Let's get going then."

Mike led the way through the woods, keeping careful watch for branches and roots before they stumbled into them. Several times, he took hold of her hand to help her over fallen trees that blocked their path. Eventually, though, they dropped the pretense of assistance and kept their fingers intertwined as they walked.

It took the better part of an hour, but the place Mike was looking for finally came into view. The cabin had been sitting out here abandoned for years, as far as he could tell. The party had found it last summer and had come back a few times, but never saw any signs of life around the old place. It was far from any main roads, and even the lone gravel path that led out this way stopped well short of the structure. He figured, if no one had been here for years, they wouldn't come poking around now.

Stepping up on the porch, Mike tried the doorknob, holding onto some small hope that the place had been left unlocked. The stubborn

handle groaned as he twisted, but it held firm. He tried giving the door a slam with his shoulder, but that worked no better than it had on the shed door back at the school; he decided he was going to have to stop trying that. He was just about to start searching around the porch for a hidden spare key, when he heard the old lock give a stubborn click, the knob turned and the creaking door swung inward. Mike backed away, expecting the cabin's owner to be standing there, but the place was dark and devoid of life.

Mike stared, puzzled, at the doorway for a full ten seconds before the answer dawned on him. He turned and saw El wiping a trickle of blood from her nose, a shy grin on her face.

"Thanks," Mike offered, gratefully, as they went inside and he closed the door behind them.

A quick survey of the home confirmed the place was unoccupied, and had been for quite a while judging by the thick layer of dust on every surface. However, there was still a good supply of firewood next to the old wood-stove, and more piled outside. In the cupboard, Mike was relieved to find a couple dozen old cans of soup, mostly stew and chili; it wasn't exactly gourmet, but they wouldn't starve.

That night, they dozed on the couch while keeping the fire stoked, driving the chill from the room. The next two days passed in a slow, peaceful bliss, as El recovered and they talked about all the things they would do once it was safe for her out in the world. On the third day, their peace was broken by the sound of a key turning in the lock. Both dove for cover behind the couch, Mike grabbing up the hatchet from the woodpile by the stove and El preparing to fight if it came to that. Neither expected it to be Hopper standing there when the door swung in.

The Chief had spent the last two days grilling everyone on places Mike might have gone, with every suggestion coming up as a dead-end. Finally, it was Dustin who mentioned the cabin, just in passing. After swearing the boys to secrecy about the place, in the unlikely event they were right, he drove out to his granddad's old home to check. He spotted the thin trail of smoke coming from the chimney and knew it had to be them.

They talked for a few hours, making careful plans for what they were going to do now. While the Chief couldn't - or wouldn't - explain exactly why, he made it clear that he was at the bottom of the lab's list of people who might be trying to hide her. As such, it was decided El would remain at the cabin and that Hopper would keep watch over her until they could ensure it was safe for her to come out of hiding. Since he knew there would be no hope of keeping them apart, Hopper agreed to let Mike come out to visit regularly, though never on his own; the Chief wanted to make sure the boy wasn't being followed. It wasn't what Mike had originally promised, at least not yet, but knowing she was safe was a good start.

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**The End**

## 9. Chapter 9

Mike and El watched the portal in silence for a few minutes, as the men on the other side busied themselves around the scene of destruction. The soldiers made no indication they were leaving that part of the hallway any time soon, and Mike couldn't help but notice how far the edges of the opening had already receded. Finally, deciding they couldn't wait any longer, Mike backed away from the portal, beckoning El to follow him.

"I think we have to take our chances, and see if we can find the Chief and Mrs. Byers."

El was nervous to leave the relative safety of the school, but like Mike, she understood they were running out of time. Whatever might be waiting in the darkness outside, they would deal with. She already knew what the men on the other side of the portal were capable of, and she was still determined to keep Mike safe, just as he was doing for her.

After forcing the door open at the end of the hall, Mike took one last hesitant look at the portal behind them, before turning and stepping out into the dead landscape of the Upside-Down. El kept close to his side as they started out toward Will's house, knowing that was where the others had been heading to retrieve Will. The town was unlike anything Mike had ever seen, a haphazard tangle of vines covering every surface of the dark and forgotten storefronts. He couldn't help but imagine all the creatures of the darkness that could be lurking just out of sight, watching them as they passed. More than once, he thought about turning them around and trying their luck back at the school, but he knew they had to press onward.

Passing the library, Mike spotted movement out of the corner of his eye. Stopping short, Mike grabbed El by the shoulders and pulled her down with him behind the remains of a car. She looked at him, her expression a mix of confusion and panic, her mind full of questions but instinctively knowing not to make a sound. Taking a deep breath, Mike poked his head back up to investigate what he had seen. A wave of relief washed over him when the shape he assumed to be another demogorgon turned out to be the very two people they were

looking for. Three, he realized, as he spotted the limp form of Will in the Chief's arms.

"Hopper!" Mike shouted, standing up from behind the car.

"What the hell are you two doing here?" the Chief growled, once he realized where the noise had come from. When he had reluctantly handed over their location to Brenner, he had been hoping the kids would have already found their way to someplace safe to hide out. This was not at all what he had in mind.

Mike laid out, as briefly as possible, everything that happened at the school, as they all started the walk back toward the lab. Joyce watched El with her usual sympathetic heartbreak at everything the girl had been forced to take on. Hopper felt some tiny satisfaction knowing that the people responsible for her captivity and cruel upbringing were dead, at the hands of the very weapon they had been creating. At the same time, he could see the innocent little girl in her, watching Will with concern as they walked, and found himself thinking of Sara yet again.

As they approached the portal that would take them back to the basement in the lab, El began to fall back, hesitant to set foot back in the place where everything first went wrong.

"It'll be okay," Mike reassured, taking hold of her hand. "We're just going through the building and right out the other side. They're not going to take you away, I promise. I won't let them."

While she wished she shared his confidence, it was enough to propel her through the ragged opening in the wall and back into her own world. It was startling to see the normally bright and sterile room in such disarray, and it brought the slightest hint of a smile to her lips. As the elevator opened onto the ground floor, they were met by a single, terrified guard. As he explained it, after things went South at the school, every last person available was sent to secure the scene.

He tried to stop them as they made their way toward the front door, explaining that Dr. Brenner had left instructions to detain them until he got back. He took a quick look at Hopper's face and he backed down, realizing he had no chance of keeping the five of them there.

Hopper headed straight for the hospital, knowing Will wasn't out of danger yet; he had regained consciousness and lost it again more times than they could count on the trek back to the lab, though Hopper was hopeful it was just exhaustion and dehydration dragging him under.

"Stay here," Hopper ordered, giving Mike and El a stern look as he stopped outside the entrance to the emergency room.

They watched through the window, keeping low and out of sight as Hopper and Joyce carried Will inside, passing him off to the doctors. A few minutes later, he came back out and drove them around to a dark corner of the parking lot. He knew this wasn't going to go easy, but it had to be done.

"Alright you two. I know you're not going to want to hear this, but I need to get El into hiding. Tonight."

"Okay," Mike agreed. "So where do we take her?"

Hopper leveled a hard stare back at Mike, and the reality sunk in like a punch to the stomach.

"No. You can't just take her away, and lock her up somewhere. That's what they did to her."

"Look," Hopper said, a little more sympathy in his voice. "You want to keep her safe, right? They're going to be watching you like a hawk, trying to get to her. It's not fair, but the best way to keep her safe is if you don't know where she is."

Mike fought back the tears welling in his eyes. As much as he wanted to fight it, he knew the Chief was right. El looked quickly from Hopper to Mike and back again, following what they were saying and debating whether to go, or to refuse and stay with Mike.

"This isn't going to be forever," he continued, seeing the heartbreak written on both their faces. "Just until things are safe."

He gave them a few minutes to say their goodbyes, fighting the urge to take Mike along but knowing it would only make things more dangerous. After a final embrace he never wanted to end, Mike

helped El back into the front seat of the Blazer with a final promise that Hopper could be trusted, and that he would see her soon. As the Chief turned to climb behind the wheel, Mike grabbed his arm and fixed him with the most commanding look he could muster.

"Keep her safe."

Hopper and El drove in silence for a few minutes, the girl trying to gauge the man Mike said she could trust. She believed Mike, but could still sense an underlying unease as they headed toward the far side of town.

"I have somewhere to take you," Hopper started. "It's close by, but not somewhere the lab would ever think to come looking for you. You won't be alone out there, and I promise I'll keep you safe."

He paused, taking a deep breath before plowing onward.

"I need you to know you can trust me, and part of that means we have to be honest with each other. There's no easy way to say this, but I'm the reason Brenner knew where to find you tonight."

El shrank back against the door, trying to put some distance between the Chief and herself. She debated jumping out and taking her chances on her own, but she sat there and listened to him pour out his side of the story. She wanted to hate him for what he had done, but she understood, it had been the only way to get Will back. She believed him when he said he would have done everything in his power to get her back out of Brenner's clutches if he had taken her back. She could hear the sincerity in his voice as he apologized and promised to do everything to make sure the lab would never get to her.

By the time they reached Hopper's trailer at the lake, she forgave him with three simple words. "I trust you."

After gathering a quick box of supplies at his house, they drove out to their final destination at his grandfather's old cabin in the woods. It was far from the main roads and not someplace he thought anyone would come investigating. They got a fire going to drive out the chill and straightened up the bedroom so she could get some sleep.



"This first day or two, I'm going to have to keep some distance while everything gets sorted out in town. But I promise, I'll come back, and we'll get things fixed up better out here."

In the end, they managed to turn the cabin into a home. Hopper moved out to the cabin to stay with her, to watch over her, and to start the process of getting her ready to join the outside world. At times they clashed, as two strong personalities are bound to do in such close quarters. While he wouldn't agree to let Mike come out to the cabin, he compromised and helped to pass notes back and forth through Joyce. She could visit him in the Void and let him know she was there.

Their reunion took far longer than any of them would have originally thought, but they finally managed in early Spring. Joyce succeeded in keeping the actual details a secret when she arranged to take Mike and Will up to Chicago for a weekend getaway. She shrugged off Mike's puzzled look when they turned East a couple hours outside of Hawkins. She flat out refused to answer Mike's question's when they turned off the highway and started up a dirt road into the woods. Finally they came to a stop in the middle of nowhere, and Joyce told him to get out.

"Just start walking up the road that way," she said with a nod. "You'll understand soon enough."

Mike was suddenly concerned it was all some kind of setup as he gave her one last puzzled look and then started up the gravel road.

"Does he suspect anything?" Hopper asked, stepping out of the woods beside Joyce.

"Not a thing," she smiled, relieved she could let down the blank expression she had held for the last few hours.

Mike was just out of sight of Joyce's car when he found himself wondering if he should turn back. He suddenly heard footsteps approaching quickly from behind, and barely had a chance to turn before El tackled him in a warm embrace, tears in her eyes and a smile on her face.

"I missed you!"

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**The End**

## 10. Chapter 10

El watched as Mike started toward the hallway, then stopped and turned back, rushing over to the windows that lined the cafeteria wall. He pulled a chair over and stood peering out into the darkness. While he tried to figure out just who was coming to the school, she thought about what had just happened between them. He had been explaining about a school dance, when he had suddenly put his lips on hers. It was unexpected but not unpleasant; it had given her a strange fluttery feeling in her chest and somehow she felt like she understood what he meant about friends who aren't just friends.

Her smile fell the second Mike turned from the window, panic etched across his face.

"They found us!" he shouted toward the kitchen, where Dustin and Lucas were raiding the refrigerator in search of chocolate pudding.

"They found us," he said to El, much softer but just as urgent, as he took her hands and helped her to her feet. "We've gotta go."

As they broke into a run across the cafeteria, Dustin and Lucas emerged from the kitchen, their arms overflowing with pudding cans.

"What are you yelling about?" Dustin asked, looking for a table to set down his load.

"They found us. The bad men," he shot back. "We have to go. Now!"

Dropping their arm-loads of cans, the two boys broke into a run as well, falling in just steps behind Mike and El as they burst through the cafeteria doors and into the hallway. Mike thought quickly, trying to decide the quickest route out of the building. If they could just get away from the school and into the woods, they should be able to find their way to someplace safe. Starting down the short hallway to the right, they pulled up short as flashlights began to play across the sidewalk outside, betraying the fact that people were rapidly approaching the door.

"Other way, go back," Mike ordered, turning to follow El who was

already starting back down the hall in the other direction. As they reached the point where several hallways met, they could already hear voices entering the building to their left, so it was an easy decision to head to the right. Almost immediately, they met up with another hallway and had to make another choice. Mike laid out the two options quickly, knowing they had just seconds to decide.

"If we go left and through the gym, we come out closer to the parking lot, but there are a few ways out of there so we stand a better shot of finding a clear exit. If we go right, it's a straight shot to the back of the school and the woods beyond. But if they've sent people back there, they'll have us pinned in."

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If you think they should head left and out through the gym, go to Chapter 11

If you think they should head right and out through the wing of classrooms, go to Chapter 12

## 11. Chapter 11

"Left", Dustin and Lucas shouted almost in unison, starting into a run once more.

The group burst through the doors of the gym and were relieved to find the place silent and empty. As they passed the pool in the middle of the floor, Mike realized his SuperComm was still sitting there, but he refused to slow down for even an instant to grab it; the radio could be replaced, but there was only one El and he had to get her out. They had almost reached the exit in the far corner when the doors suddenly swung open. Several agents and soldiers came in first, weapons drawn and flashlights raised, followed closely by Dr. Brenner.

Both groups came to a stop, sizing each other up for a split second, before the kids turned and started toward another exit. As before, a group of guards came in through that door just before they reached it.

"Back to the hall," Mike shouted, turning quickly and pulling El with him.

The four pivoted hard and raced back the way they had come. A third group came in from the hallway, effectively cutting off any route of escape. Slowly, the men from the lab moved in, herding the kids toward the middle of the room. With nowhere left to run, the boys gathered around El, creating what little barrier they could between her and the men who had come to take her away. Dr. Brenner stepped out from behind the line of soldiers, as menacingly calm as ever.

"Step away from the child," he ordered.

"No," Mike shouted, defiantly. "You want her, you have to kill me first."

"Remove the boys," Brenner ordered, with more than a little irritation, to the agent on his left.

The man gave a nod and stepped forward. Several more stepped out from around the ring, guns drawn, and began slowly closing in on the group. El knew she had to act quickly, and tried to judge how many she could take on at once. The boys had done what they could to protect her, and now she was prepared to do whatever it took to guard them in return. Ducking her head low, El focused on the men closest to the group, nine of them in all, and froze them where they stood. She stared hard at Brenner, waiting from him to relent and call off his men.

"Eleven, let them go," he said calmly, refusing to give in to what he viewed as nothing more than the tantrum of a petulant child.

She shook her head slowly, apply a tighter grip to the men frozen around her. Capillaries began to rupture in their faces, blood running slowly from their eyes, out of their nose, pooling in their throats. A few began struggling to even draw a breath, but still she held on, ready to drop her hold the second Brenner gave the order to fall back. He continued to watch her, not backing down in the face of her outburst. El watched the expression slowly changing on his face to one she had seen countless times before; he was showing just the slightest hints of pride in the latest demonstration of her abilities. A wave of nauseous rage washed over her as she realized she was playing right into his hands, and in that moment she lost control, the anger flooding out across her grip on the men she held captive. With a sickening crunch, their necks snapped in unison and their bodies slumped lifeless to the floor.

El felt her knees begin to shake and darkness swam in at the edges of her vision. She knew she was about to fall but she couldn't stop herself. As she tumbled backward, she felt arms catching her and gently lowering her to the ground; she couldn't see him but she knew it was Mike, no one else was that gentle with her. The world was dark before her eyes, sounds muted. There was a scuffling - shouts and movement - but she couldn't make sense of it. She strained to open her eyes, and Mike was gone. She was in Papa's arms again, he was saying something about taking her home, but that couldn't be right. Mike's basement, the blanket fort, those were home. In her current state, nothing made sense. She struggled against his hold, turning her head to look for Mike. One of the soldiers had an arm

around him, restraining him as he fought to break free. She tried to reach out to him, to call his name, but the world went swimmy before her eyes and she passed out again.

There was a sudden rumbling that shook the room, and the far wall of the gym began to crack. The normally solid brick wall began to bubble outward as the demogorgon pushed an opening through from the Upside-Down. Mike tore his focus away from the wall, surveying the bodies in the middle of the room and the blood pooling up around each one.

"Blood," Mike shouted.

"What?" Lucas asked, not turning his eyes away.

"Blood," he repeated, louder this time to overcome the sounds of crumbling brick. "Nancy said it's attracted to blood."

The three soldiers holding the boys pulled them quickly toward the back wall of the gym, followed closely by Dr. Brenner carrying an unconscious Eleven. The rest of the soldiers formed up in an arc taking aim at where the creature was climbing through the wall and into the room. For a few moments, they stood frozen, unprepared for the otherworldly horror they were facing. Only when it leapt forward, grabbing at the nearest man and sinking claws deep into his chest, did the rest of the soldiers open fire. It looked up with a savage roar as bullets began to tear through its hide. The soldiers closed in, the creature caught in a tightly constricting ark of gunfire, driving it back toward the wall. It quickly realized it was about to be overpowered, still weakened from the fiery attack it had faced not long before. With a final roar of anger, the demogorgon drug itself back through to the other side, leaving the room in silence.

Not wanting to chance another encounter if the creature decided to come back, Dr. Brenner gathered El more securely in his arms and started toward the door.

"What about the kids," one of the soldiers asked, still rattled by what he had just seen.

"Keep them here, I'm sure someone will be along for them

eventually," he answered.

Mike resumed his struggle against the arms holding him restrained. "No! You can't take her," he shouted. "You can't do this."

Dustin and Lucas shouted similar protests, struggling against captors. Brenner turned again to address the boys.

"She is no longer your concern. You've had your little adventure. Now, the best thing you can do for her is to forget," he said, coldly.

"Never," Mike said in defiance. As long as he was breathing, he would never forget her, and he would never stop fighting to get her back.

"Mike," El moaned weakly, reaching out a hand to him.

"It's time to go home, Eleven." Brenner whispered to her, then looked up at Mike, smugly adding, "I promise, she'll be well looked after. And thank you, for the tip about the blood. That will help in baiting it in."

With that, he turned and walked across the gym floor and out the doors on the far side into the cool night air. El kept her arm raised out to Mike as long as she could before finally letting it drop. Only once they were gone did the soldiers relax their grip on the boys, ushering them out of the gym and back to the cafeteria to wait. They sat in silence, each grieving over the loss of their friend. At one point, Dustin pulled open the lid on one of the cans of pudding he had been looking forward to before everything went to hell, but set the can back down again, immediately losing his appetite. Hours later, an exhausted Hopper was allowed in, followed by an armed escort, to pick up the boys.

"Don't say a word, just come with me," he said quietly, eyeing the men around the room cautiously.

They walked in a line out to the Blazer and drove off into the night. Nothing was said as they drove to the hospital, each lost in thought. Only as they parked in a far corner of the lot, did Dustin begin watching Hopper with suspicion. He had been wary of the Chief, even back on the bus, and had a sense something wasn't right.



"How did they know where to find her?" he asked bluntly, breaking the silence.

Mike looked up, startled at the question but realizing it made too much sense. Even in the dim glow of the streetlights, the guilt on Hopper's face said it all.

"It was you?" Mike asked, instantly furious. "I trusted you. I promised El she could trust you."

Hopper did his best to explain what happened, how it was the only way they were going to get to Will. How they were ready to kill him, and possibly Joyce too, if they didn't make a deal.

"Look, it was a terrible choice either way, and I know that doesn't make it alright. But we're going to get her back. You have my word."

Lucas and Dustin said nothing, conflicted thoughts running through their heads. They got Will back, but at what cost? They were certain it was a sacrifice El would have made for herself, given the choice, but he had taken that choice away. Mike sat with a seething rage growing deep inside, hearing but barely processing Hoppers explanation. Without a word, Mike got out of the Blazer, giving the door the hardest slam he could muster, knocking the passenger window off its track, and stormed into the building. When the three of them came in a few minutes later and joined the group already gathered in the waiting room, Mike got up and moved to the furthest seat he could from Hopper, not wanting to be anywhere near the man who had so casually traded El's life away. He spent the rest of the night staring Hopper down from across the room, wrestling with the hurt of losing her and refusing to accept his story that it had been the only choice.

The next morning, six cows were reported missing from a local farm just outside town. Cattle theft was rare in the farms around Hawkins, but it was still the most routine crime reported to the police in over a week. By that night, a back corner of the lab's property had been hastily clear-cut, and the butchered cattle sat piled in the middle; bait for the monster. El stood nearby, bundled against the chilly night air by the smallest pair of olive-drab coveralls the lab could find on short notice; the pink dress and Hopper's jacket had been taken away and

sent to the incinerator as soon as they returned to the lab. To El's left stood Dr. Brenner, a steadying hand on her shoulder, waiting for their prey to be drawn in. He was certain his men had already been on the verge of figuring out how to entice the creature, but the Wheeler boy had saved them time by providing the answer outright. To El's right stood her latest escort, present whenever she left her room. The man was armed with tranquilizers and strict instructions to use them the moment she stepped out of line. She was certain there was a second, somewhere close but out of sight, in case she tried to incapacitate the first in an effort to run.

El stood at the ready, clear on her instructions. As soon as the creature pulled itself into this world, she was to pin it down and keep it in place so the soldiers currently standing at attention in a half-ring around the cattle could unload the firepower they were shouldering and put an end to it. Under no circumstances was she to let it climb back through to the Upside-Down. Papa had been drilling her on the plan for hours and she knew it by heart. He had also been regularly reminding her it was her fault the creature had found its way over in the first place, and it was her responsibility to help stop it. He was quick to point out all the lives that could have been spared if she hadn't run off in the first place.

She fought hard to push his words out of her mind, but his voice had a way of worming in and sounding like the truth. Her only way to counter it was to call up memories of Mike, holding her in a tight embrace and telling her she wasn't a monster; that none of this was her fault. She didn't know how, but she knew she would find her way back to him. She had escaped before and she would do it again, but she had a mess to clean up first.

El was on high-alert as she waited, her body tingling with anticipation as she shifted her weight quickly from one foot to the other. She hadn't noticed anything unusual in the cup of vitamins that accompanied her dinner and blindly swallowed the single tablet of amphetamines Dr. Brenner had included. It was the first time he had broken his own rule and given her pharmaceuticals outside those prescribed by every pediatrician in the country, but he knew she was drained from her week on the run, and he needed her at her best. He also found himself questioning whether she should be dosed with

sedatives between training sessions, to keep her more manageable. He decided he would wait and see if she pressed the issue or not.

Shortly before 9:00 that night, the creature pulled itself into the world in search of a meal, and the plan was put into action. El threw everything she had at the demogorgon, who fought hard to break her invisible bonds, and the soldiers dispatched the creature once and for all. In spite of the chemical boost running through her veins, she was still pushed to the point of collapse by the end of the fight. She was brought back inside and taken to her new room, deeper in the lab. More doors, locks and guards stood between her and the outside world than ever before. Her new bedroom was also clad in the same copper sheeting that lined the walls of her punishment room; an additional measure to keep her from using her powers without Brenner's knowledge or consent. The coveralls were taken away and she was given back a hospital gown and sent to bed.

Across town, Mike had been sitting in the silence of his basement when the lights began to fluctuate. It looked like any other disturbance in power, but deep down, he knew. He had watched from El's rebuilt blanket fort, as the lights suddenly grew bright, went dead, and flickered back to normal. It was El - he knew it was her - and he knew Brenner was forcing her to face off against the demogorgon again. All he could do was whisper a silent prayer that she was alright as he watched the bulbs, refusing to blink away from the brightness as his eyes began to burn. Even after the lights returned to normal, he stared at the bulb in the lamp across the room for a long time before admitting it was done.

Finally, he pulled on his shoes, grabbed his coat and walked outside, pulling the basement door silently shut behind him. He walked through the darkness, blindly making his way across the outskirts of Hawkins. Stepping up on the battered porch of a trailer by a lake, he pounded his fist on the door. When no response came, he pounded again, louder and longer, ready to break the door in if he had to. Finally the owner stumbled his way to the door and pulled it open. Mike pushed passed a stunned Chief Hopper and stomped into the living room, plopping down on the couch.

"I don't forgive you." Mike began, slowly. "I don't know if I ever can."

Hopper nodded, understanding what he meant. He wasn't sure he could forgive himself, either.

"So what's the plan?" Mike asked. "How are we getting her out of there?"

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**The End**

## 12. Chapter 12

"Right", Dustin and Lucas shouted almost in unison, starting into a run once more.

El trusted that the boys knew best how to get safely out of the building and she fell in beside Mike as they headed toward the doors at far end of the hall. As they approached, she was relieved to see no signs of flashlights or soldiers waiting to greet them. Still, they stopped at the door and Lucas poked his head outside to make sure the coast was clear.

"No one there, let's go," he said as he pushed the door open the rest of the way.

The other three ran out behind him and they started across the football field toward the woods beyond.

"They're over there. Stop!" they heard shouted from somewhere behind them.

Rather than obeying the order, they ran even faster toward the woods, so close they could almost feel the trees. They had guessed, and rightly so, that Dr. Brenner intended to recapture El unharmed and his men wouldn't risk opening fire on the group if she was right there with them. Within seconds, more soldiers joined in the chase, shouting orders to stop immediately. Flashlight beams played off the grass all around them as they tore across the field. Mike took one quick glance over his shoulder and confirmed his fear; several of those flashlights were attached to guns aimed their direction.

As they hit the tree-line, Lucas tumbled over a root. As he fell toward the ground, Mike and Dustin hooked their arms under his and drug him upright again, barely breaking their stride. A few more steps and they were fully engulfed in the darkness of the trees. Slowing only a little, Mike reached out and took El's hand to guide her as they followed a familiar route. The boys were now in their element; they had dashed into the forest along here more than once to escape bullies who had targeted the group. As they continued deeper into the woods, they became aware that the soldiers pursuing them had

fallen far enough back that they were out of danger. Once they reached the train tracks, they decided it was finally safe to stop and catch their breath.

Back at the school, a frustrated Dr. Brenner had just finished receiving a report from his second-in-command: the kids had escaped into the woods and no one else was found in the school.

"You're telling me more than a two dozen soldiers and highly trained agents couldn't apprehend four children on the run?" he asked, sarcastically. "Was the girl at least using her abilities to hamper your progress or are you just that incompetent?"

The suit-clad agent hung his head, which gave Brenner all the answer he needed.

"No matter, I have a good idea where they're headed. Send six men to setup a perimeter around the Wheeler house, just in case they head there. They are to report only, no confrontation; the girl can easily take them out if they aren't careful. Get everyone else loaded up. I believe they'll decide the Byers' house will be their safest sanctuary while they wait for the Chief and Mrs. Byers to come back through the portal. When the children get there, we will be waiting for them."

Out in the woods, the four caught their breath and started out along the long abandoned train tracks. As they walked, they argued over where they should go next.

"Once the Chief finds Will, they're obviously going to take him right home. I say we go to Will's house to wait for them." Lucas reasoned.

"Right, and you just assume the bad men haven't come to that exact same conclusion? They're probably on their way out to his house right now to wait for us." Dustin countered.

"Okay, so what's your plan then, genius?" Lucas argued, defensive that Dustin had managed to poke a pretty glaring hole in his logic.

"I say we go back to the junkyard. There's plenty of places to hide out, our bikes are still there, and the Chief will probably think to check there once he realizes we aren't at the school," Dustin offered.

"Now who's playing right into their hands?" Lucas shot back. "That's exactly where we went last time we ran from them. For all we know, that could be where they are sending their forces."

"Mike, what do you think? The junkyard or Will's house?" Dustin asked, turning to look at Mike and El, who were walking a few steps behind.

Mike had only been half-following Lucas and Dustin's bickering. Most of his focus had been on El, who was struggling to keep her feet under her; she was still badly drained from her time in the bath, pushing her mind into the Upside Down to find Will and Barb. He thought hard about the question. The junkyard was closer, had plenty of places to hide and lots of trails back into the woods to escape again if the agents showed up. On the other hand, the Byers' would have food, blankets to warm her up and a place for her to rest and try to recover. The thing was, Dustin was probably right that the bad men would think to head there to. He was at a loss where they should go.

"Well?" Dustin asked again.

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To head to the junkyard and try to wait things out, go to Chapter 13

To continue on through the trees to the Byers' house, go to Chapter 14

## 13. Chapter 13

After taking a minute to think it over, Mike finally answered. "Let's go to the junkyard. When they get back with Will, there's not going to be anything we can do anyway. At the bus, it's quiet so we'll be able to hear if anyone is coming."

There were nods of agreement all around and they started out. They picked their way along the tracks in silence for a few minutes, stepping carefully to avoid tripping in the dark. Fortunately they knew the path well; even El was beginning to get used to the route. Once they felt certain they were truly alone, Lucas finally pulled the flashlight of his backpack and cast the beam along the rutted path ahead of them.

As they reached the junkyard, Lucas flicked the light back off. They decided to circle around the edge first to make sure there was nobody waiting to grab them. Sticking to the trees and blending into the blackness that surrounded them, they moved slowly and silently, pausing often to listen for the slightest sound. Finally deciding they were safe, Lucas played a beam of light across their path to the bus. Approaching from the far side where the discarded piles of scrap were deeper, they were forced to march single file.

"Ow, son of a bitch," Dustin suddenly swore from the back of the pack as they neared the bus.

Three heads spun around quickly, worried he had been grabbed by someone who managed to sneak behind them. They found him on the ground holding his leg as blood ran freely from a gash along his calf. Looking around with the flashlight, Lucas spotted the jagged end of a long rusty pipe sticking out into the path. It was amazing the other three had managed to slip passed unharmed.

Handing the flashlight to El, Lucas and Mike helped Dustin back to his feet and they made their way over to the bus and slipped inside. Working quickly, Lucas cut away the lower pant leg from around the gash and wiped off the dirt and blood as best he could. Needing something to wrap the wound and staunch the bleeding, he untied the bandanna from around his head and knotted it expertly around



Dustin's leg.

"I think you'll live," he teased, patting his friend on the shoulder. "Good thing you already got a tetanus shot last summer when you stepped on that nail."

"Yeah, and you're the one who spilled the can of nails in the first place," he shot back, then, looking over the bandage on his leg, he added "Thanks."

Lucas helped him up onto one of the seats, before settling into the one across the aisle. Mike and El had already settled into a seat one row back. Her head was resting gently on his shoulder and her eyes were drooping closed as he put an arm around her. As tired as he was, something nagged at the back of Mike's mind. He could hear his sister's voice, something important she had said earlier that afternoon, but the specific warning felt just out of reach.

Outside, across the abandoned lot, a rattling noise started among a pile of old cars. Moments later, there was a shriek of metal as one car was slid violently off of another. In a panic, Lucas dropped the flashlight and Mike watched the flickering beam roll across the aisle of the bus, illuminating a trail of red drops running back up to the front and out the door.

"Blood," Mike said, Nancy's guess about what attracted the demogorgon suddenly resolving clearly into his mind.

"What?" Dustin asked, peering through the window into the darkness.

"Blood!" Mike repeated, more urgently. "Nancy said it's attracted to blood!"

"Shit," Dustin whispered as a slid off his seat and onto the ground. The others followed suit and crept over to the windows on the side of the bus where the noise had come from. Chancing a look outside, they could just make out the figure of the demogorgon in the dim light, crouched close to the ground and sniffing a puddle of blood where Dustin had fallen after cutting himself.

All at once, it started following the trail of drops leading away from

the puddle and toward its injured prey. They knew they had only seconds before it found its way to the bus and they would be trapped. They only needed one look at the creature to know the wrist-rocket would offer little protection; they needed an escape route. While the demogorgon slowly followed the trail around the bus toward the door at the front, Mike crept over to the emergency exit at the rear. He gave the handle a gentle but solid shove and the metal gave a cry of protest as years of rust resisted his effort. At that same moment, the demogorgon reached the front door and found its path blocked. It reached out and gave the door a shake as it tried to find a way around the impediment keeping it from its meal.

Mike knew the door up front wouldn't hold the creature back if it decided to throw its full strength at it, so he braced his shoulder against the emergency exit handle and shoved with all his might. Agonizingly, the stubborn handle finally moved. A second shove and he had the door unlatched and pushed it open. At the front of the bus, the demogorgon sniffed around the edges of the door and easily picked up the scent of blood and meat inside. With a renewed effort, it reached out two clawed hands and tore the entrance open.

As it climbed aboard, Mike helped lower Dustin out the back door to a waiting El and Lucas, before jumping down himself. They had barely taken two steps away from bus when the furious creature came barreling out the back door behind them, anxious to claim the meal that had summoned it from across the void. Knowing they would have no choice but to fight, the boys quickly grabbed the pipe Dustin had alerted them to earlier. As the demogoron stalked forward, assessing the group and trying to decide which morsel it would go after first, they thrust the pipe forward intending to stab the beast. Their first thrust went wide and only grazed its side as it let out a piercing growl, now even angrier.

In a flash of selfless clarity, El realized there was only one way to save her friends. She knew she could never live with herself if anything happened to them; most especially Mike. Mustering the last of her strength, she reached out with her mind and threw the creature against the side of the bus. Running on instinct, she stepped forward toward the pinned nightmare, ready to tear it apart. She knew the act of destroying it would probably end her as well.

She turned sadly to Mike, ready to tell him a final goodbye.

"El, you're a genius," Mike complimented.

Confused, she could see he had a plan in mind. Turning back, she threw all her might into holding the monster at bay, pinned to the rusty hulk. With a shout of rage, the boys hoisted the pole again and charged ahead at full speed. With the creature held still, they managed to land a direct hit and skewer it in the chest, driving the sharp pipe all the way through and into the side of the bus. The demogorgon growled a piercing roar of pain and anger as they delivered the fatal wound. It growled a second time, weaker, spewing forth a slimy orange goo as it did so. Exhausted, El dropped her hold on the monster and fell backward into Mike's arms. The creature issued one final growl, almost a whimper, and fell limp against the pole.

Hours later, as they had predicted, Hopper found them in the junkyard. They were awakened by the sound of approaching tires, and were startled to find it was Jonathan's car, rather than Hopper's Blazer. The Chief stepped onto the bus and demanded everyone get moving. He drove the group straight to the hospital, explaining that Will was in bad shape and being treated there.

Pulling up in front of the main entrance, he said, "Alright boys. Out."

Dustin and Lucas climbed out and shut their doors behind them, but Mike hesitated, still in the car and holding his door half open.

"Wait, where are you taking her?" Mike asked.

"Away," Hopper replied, flatly.

"I'm coming too then," Mike responded, not asking.

"We don't have time for this. Shut your door."

Mike slammed the door shut and Hopper pulled away, leaving a bewildered Lucas and Dustin standing on the curb in front of the hospital.

"Look, there's no easy way to put this," Hopper explained as he drove

quickly through town. "Brenner is pissed as hell, and he's tearing this town apart looking for her. I can't explain why, but he's looking for me, too. I have to get her out of here. Tonight."

"Okay, then we get her out," Mike answered, "I'm ready to do whatever it takes to keep her safe."

"I know you are kid," he said sadly. "I can't take you with us, you're parents will have every authority in the country looking for you. I have to get her out of town. I can't tell you where we're going or when we'll be back." He paused, then added, "Or if we'll be back."

The realization that this would be goodbye hit Mike like a ton of bricks. He was ready to do anything to protect her, but he never imagined that might mean losing her in the process. Mike and El stared at each other in disbelief as the reality of what was happening sank in. He reach out and took her hands in his own, unsure what to say in their last moments together. Meanwhile, Hopper was a man on a mission, needing to gather a few supplies before he left Hawkins, probably forever. He stopped first at his own house and ran inside, leaving the car running. He came out minutes later with a duffel bag in one hand and a child's drawing of a family beside a red house in the other. He tossed these on the front seat and then quickly peeled out of the gravel driveway and onto the main road again.

They drove for a few more minutes down a road on the outskirts of town and then turned down a bumpy dirt path that looked like it hadn't seen tires in years. Hopper stopped when the road came to an end and Mike could just barely make out the outline of a cabin in the distance, illuminated through the trees by the headlights. He walked down he disused trail and let himself in, emerging seconds later with an old file box labeled "Sara" under one arm. Arriving back at the car, he opened the lid long enough to slip the drawing into the box and then put the car in gear, turning around and driving back up to the road.

"Okay, this is where I have to kick you out," Hopper said, putting the car in park and giving Mike an apologetic look in the rear-view mirror.

Fighting back tears, Mike wrapped El in a hug. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I

couldn't keep you safe from the bad men," he apologized.

"I'm sorry too," she said, holding back her own tears and unsure just how to express everything running through her mind. As they pulled apart again, she looked deep into his eyes and a strange feeling came over her. Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to his, as he had done hours before. She still wasn't sure just what the action was called, but something deep inside told her it was meant for moments like this.

"Goodbye Mike," she whispered sadly as she pulled away, no longer able to keep the tears from falling.

"Goodbye El," he answered, his own tears breaking free.

Mike climbed out of the car and gently closed the door behind him. As Hopper drove away, Mike stepped out into the middle of the road, desperate to watch her for as long as possible as she looked back out the rear window. Tears fell unchecked as he watched until finally the car turned a corner and she was gone. Only then did he contemplate the long walk back to town.

It was almost six months later when a postcard arrived with a simple message:

*I am okay. I hope you are okay. I miss you.*

*El*

It was a picture from Florida, but the postmark was from Texas; Hopper was clearly being careful about covering their tracks. As badly as Mike wanted to know where she was, he was grateful that Hopper was taking every precaution against being tracked. Several more postcards came over the next few years, always pictures from one place and mailed from another, to make tracking impossible. Eventually the cards stopped coming and as much as it hurt to lose that last connection to her, he understood; if remembering hurt him as much as it did, it probably hurt her too. He could only hope it meant she was moving on and that she was safe and happy. Somewhere deep inside, he knew that somehow, they would meet again someday. Just maybe, they would have a second chance.

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## **The End**

**Authors Note: Some of you may recognize this ending as a close cousin to the beginning of one of my other stories, Second Chance by the Sea (\*cough\* shameless plug of my other story \*cough\*). When I first started sketching out this story, I had intended to take some of the endings and run with them as followup works. As plans changed and priorities shuffled around, I decided to go ahead with Second Chance on its own instead, but I still liked this for one of the endings so I kept it in.**

## 14. Chapter 14

Wait, what are you doing here? Is this really the way you want to go? We clearly heard Brenner say he's sending most of his men to the Byers' house to wait for the kids to show up there. The junkyard has the bus, places to hide, and ways to get back out in case the bad men show up. It's not too late to change your mind and double back.

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Yes, I'm sure. Let's go to the Byers'. Go to Chapter 15

You're right, I'm not sure what I was thinking. Let's go to the junkyard. Go to Chapter 13

## 15. Chapter 15

Exhausted from the walk, and the late hour, the group stumbled out of the woods and into the Byers' front yard. Idly talking about everything that had happened that night, they were oblivious to the agents slowly circling in behind them. As they approached the front door, a calm but commanding voice called out.

"Stop. That's far enough," Dr. Brenner ordered.

Four young figures froze where they were on the porch, shoulders tensed, and slowly turned around to realize they were surrounded. Brenner stepped forward to address them, still trusting he could bring this all to a peaceful resolution.

"It's time to go home, Eleven. We need to put a stop to all this. No one else needs to get hurt."

Against her better judgment, El felt herself starting to take a step forward, responding to the voice she had been trained since birth to obey. She had barely begun moving, when Mike stepped around her, positing himself between them.

"You're not taking her back there. If you want her, you have to go through me, first."

"Through us," Lucas corrected, joining Mike at the edge of the porch.

Dustin stepped forward, completing the wall and shielding her from the doctor's advance. Irritated and desperate to maintain control of the situation, he turned to the agents gathered behind him.

"Would you remove them, please?" he asked; an order, not a request.

Three men stepped forward, guns in hand, and moved toward the boys to get them out of Brenner's way. They had made it no more than halfway to the porch when all three froze mid-step. The boys recognized the puzzled look on their faces from when El stopped Troy's charge in the gym. The puzzlement changed to fear as their faces began to twist into a grimace of pain before freezing all



together.

El had sized up Brenner's attitude and assessed the situation for herself. He was trying to clean up the mess as silently as possible. There were no witnesses out here, and he had already proven he was ready to leave Will in the Upside-Down to perish. If he got her back into the lab, Mike and the others could cause him no end of grief. She could see in the cold gaze of his eyes, he was ready to silence the boys, permanently.

Mike looked back and forth, first at the pained fear on the agents' faces, then at the cold determination on El's. While he didn't understand it yet, he knew she had her reason for doing it, and that was good enough for him. She held the men in place a few seconds longer, blood beginning to flow from their eyes, before they suddenly dropped to the ground, lifeless. Mike turned in time to see the pale exhaustion wash across El's face before she, too, started to fall. He stepped forward just in time to catch her.

What happened next, Mike could never quite be sure. As he cradled El gently in his arms, he was vaguely aware of Brenner ordering additional agents to seize them. He heard Dustin and Lucas trying to fight off the arms grabbing for them. He felt firm hands on his own shoulders, but he shrugged them away, refusing to be pulled from her. Her tired eyes took in the struggle, and she tried to call out Mike's name. Then the ground shook and the hands were off his shoulders. Behind him, he heard men yelling, feet running, then, the otherworldly cry of the demogorgon.

He didn't look; didn't want to see. If they could stop it, they would stop it. If they couldn't, the creature would have to go through him, before he let it get to El. His eyes found hers, and he pulled her tighter, shutting out the world. He wanted to tell her it would be okay, to promise everything would turn out alright, but friends don't lie, and it wasn't a promise he was certain he could keep. Behind his back, orders were shouted, gunfire rang out, men screamed in anguish and the demogorgon roared in anger. Mike held his breath, waiting for the end, making his peace with the world.

Then there was silence. In truth, there was a plenty of noises - moans from the fallen, shuffling feet, words of comfort - but it all felt still

compared to the chaos that filled the yard just minutes before. Finally, accepting that the end hadn't come for them, Mike hazarded a look over his shoulder at the destruction spread all around. Men lay everywhere, suited agents and soldiers alike, many dead, more wounded. A few still stood, some helping those they could, others dazed and shell-shocked. In the middle of the driveway, splayed out on the gravel, lay the shattered remains of the demogorgon. It had fought hard, but in the end, firepower had won out; just barely. Dustin and Lucas were at the far end of the porch, still restrained by two soldiers acting on the last orders they'd been given, too horrified at what had transpired to think. And at the far side of all the carnage, looking over the scene with a calm bordering on indifference, stood Dr. Brenner, alive and unscathed.

His eyes met Mike's across the expanse of the yard, and for the briefest moment, he let a look of anger cross over his abnormally calm face. His life's work was falling apart before his eyes, his little girl was growing too defiant to control, and he had just lost most of the people loyal to his project. He started forward across the yard, when headlights swung a wide arc across his path, and Hopper pulled his Blazer to a stop on the edge of the destruction. He had only just started to step out of the vehicle when Brenner ordered two nearby soldiers to seize him.

As the guards got Hopper restrained and down on his knees, Brenner walked slowly across the yard, stepping around the fallen.

"It's time to go home, Eleven," he repeated, fighting to keep in control of the situation.

Now that El was coming around a little, Mike helped her sit up against the wall before standing to face Brenner.

"I told you, you're not taking her."

Brenner was quickly losing patience with this boy, who had thwarted him at every turn for the past week.

"I don't see how you intend on stopping me," he answered, hardly believing he was dignifying Mike with a response. "She might be able to stop me, but she won't. Now, stand aside."

"No." he said, defiantly. "You want her, you're going to have to kill me first."

"So be it," he said calmly, giving his head an exasperated shake.

In one practiced and fluid motion, he reached a hand into his jacket and pulled out the shiny, silver 9mm pistol he kept holstered under his arm, took aim and fired a single shot, catching Mike just below the ribs. It would be a few hours before he realized the error of that moment, but with a single shot, he had lost. For now, he felt some small sense of smug satisfaction in having put the boy in his place.

"No!" El screamed, reaching desperately for Mike.

Mike looked down at his stomach and gingerly touched the growing bloom of red before stumbling backward and sitting hard against the wall. El, now fully alert, was immediately by his side, calling his name. The few remaining soldiers, horrified at what they had just witnessed, forgot about the man they were supposed to be guarding. Hopper took the opportunity and broke free, jumping to his feet, crossed the yard in just a few steps and slammed broadside into Brenner. He slapped handcuffs on his wrists before moving up to the porch to check on Mike.

"Help is on the way," he reassured Mike; the initial call for paramedics was what had summoned him out to the house in the first place. "Just hold on."

Turning back to the yard, Hopper sized up the few remaining soldiers and took a chance.

"You two," he began, addressing the men holding Lucas and Dustin, "Let the boys go. Take Dr. Brenner into custody."

They complied and let them go, the boys rushing over to Mike and El, and crossed the yard and helped Brenner to his feet. They waited off to one side, Brenner tolerating his captivity for the moment, but knowing the reprimands for the soldiers would be severe once this was all over. Paramedics arrived, taking charge of the wounded, starting with Mike at Hopper's insistence. The Chief had to physically retrain El back as she tried to follow, offering her what little comfort

he could and assuring her the doctors would do everything they could for him. Once they were gone, he left her with Dustin and Lucas again and crossed to the Blazer to call in a favor, thankful Flo was on duty tonight.

Finally, he turned to face Brenner again, fighting the urge to punch the smug expression off his face. Instead, he took comfort in knowing the man was about to pay dearly for everything he had done.

"So what's your plan, Chief Hopper?" he began, slowly. "Do you really expect my own men to detain me? To hand me over to face some kind of charges?"

Hopper looked at the soldiers again, confirming what he had read on their faces earlier.

"These aren't your men." Hopper said. He pointed from one suited body to another scattered about the yard. "Those are your men; your hand-picked few. These men are soldiers who signed up to serve their country, and had the misfortune of being assigned to you. They just watched you shoot an unarmed twelve year old boy who was trying to stop you from hauling away the girl you've been raising in a cage since you stole her from her mother at birth."

"Your story has problems of course. Ms. Ives has been coming after the lab for years and the courts have always rejected her claims. Every single one of them. What makes you think you'll have any more luck than she did?"

"Yes, they rejected her claims," he answered, voice dripping with disdain. Brenner still wasn't getting it. "When she had no child as proof. Her daughter is standing here, right now." He nodded toward the porch. "She's the right age, and it will be quick work to prove she is, in fact, Terry's daughter."

"So, you're just going to parade her out in front of the world?" Brenner asked with a satisfied grin, trying to call the Chief's bluff.

"That's exactly what I'm going to do. Just watch how fast your support dries up. We won't have to say a thing about what she can do, and that works out even better. She's just a little girl you

kidnapped. That's what the world will see."

Only then, did the smug smile fade away. Hopper's plan made too much sense, and for the first time, he realized he might actually be in trouble. Once more soldiers arrived to secure the scene, Hopper loaded El, Dustin and Lucas into the Blazer, and had three MPs follow him with Brenner. He dropped the boys off at the hospital to wait with Joyce, and the Wheelers if they'd been notified yet. As they continued on to the police station, he did his best to lay out his plan, and everything that was about to happen. She didn't follow everything he described, but she understood it was all to keep her from ever being thrown back into captivity. She didn't really have a choice but to trust him at this point, but Mike trusted him, so she would too.

As they pulled up out front, Hopper was pleased to find Flo had pulled off the impossible and then some. Not only had she managed to get a news crew up from Indianapolis, on short notice, in the middle of the night, she had somehow managed to pull in a Chicago crew as well who were already out near Hawkins covering another story. He let the MPs escort Brenner inside first, moving slow and letting the cameras get all the footage they could manage. Once they were safely inside, he turned to El.

"Ready? This will all be okay. I promise."

She nodded, and Hopper let himself out of the Blazer, rounding the front and coming over to her door. With his coat around her shoulders and her face half-buried in his side, they walked into the station past the reporters, camera flashes popping as questions were hurled their way.

"I'll be making a statement in a few minutes," Hopper called over his shoulder as they went inside.

Hopper took a few minutes to ensure Brenner was safely locked away in a holding cell and set the MPs to work writing out their statements. He introduced El to Flo, who immediately took charge of the girl and set about finding her something to eat. She also chastised Hopper for not finding her something warmer to wear, knowing she had to be freezing in the old pink dress.

Stepping back out front, Hopper gave a brief statement to the news crews, providing just enough information to get Brenner shut down entirely, but leaving out the specifics of just what made El special and why the lab wanted her.

"The man you saw brought here tonight, is Dr. Martin Brenner, director of the Department of Energy lab here in Hawkins. The girl you saw escorted into the office a few minutes ago, has been a prisoner of the lab since birth. We believe she is the child of Terry Ives, who has previously made accusations against the lab for abducting her daughter and claiming the girl was deceased. Several days ago, this girl escaped from captivity in the lab, and has been helped by several local children. One of these boys, twelve years old, was shot tonight by Dr. Brenner, during attempts by the lab to recapture her. He has been taken to a local hospital but his condition is currently unknown."

The reporters hurled questions at Hopper and he answered what he could, though he was selective with the information he passed on, recognizing the importance of both protecting El and ensuring that all charges would stick on Dr. Brenner. By sunrise, the story was making headlines across the country. By lunch, the story was international. Just as Hopper had predicted, everyone with even the slightest connection to Brenner were falling over each other in an effort to distance themselves from the project and eagerly threw him under the bus.

It took a few weeks but the full story was unraveled in closed-door meetings and interviews. Those with the power to do so promised restitution and safety for El and a lifetime in prison for Brenner. After an initial few nights staying in Hopper's protective custody, El was placed in the care of the Wheeler family. Ted had his initial objections, but Karen quickly silenced those.

As she put it, "Mike was willing to take a bullet to protect her. That makes her family."

Mike spent two weeks in the hospital before they released him to go home. While he had required surgery to repair the damage left by the bullet, Brenner had managed to miss anything vital with his shot. He was left with a decent scar from the bullet, which gave some small

boost to his reputation at school. It was enhanced by the fact that he was under secretive government orders not to discuss anything about why the shooting had occurred.

As things were changed around at the Wheeler house, Mike was pleased to see his promises come true. Jane Ives was officially adopted by the Wheeler family, as Terry was unable to care for her and aunt Becky had her hands full already. Nancy and Holly were officially her sisters, and as much as the wording made him cringe, Mike was her brother, at least on paper. The basement was officially made into Mike's room, freeing up his old one upstairs to become El's. It was the first space that had ever truly been hers. She quickly grew to love all the 'real foods' Mrs. Wheeler made, though she still loved nothing better than sitting with Mike down in his room, sharing a warm plate of Eggos.

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**The End**

## 16. The Map

Below is a *hopefully* spoiler-free index of the paths through this story.

2 - Cafeteria - 3 - Hallway - 6 - Gym A

2 - Cafeteria - 3 - Hallway - 4 - Classroom - 5 - Goodbye

2 - Cafeteria - 3 - Hallway - 4 - Classroom - 7 - Upside Down - 8 Near Gate

2 - Cafeteria - 3 - Hallway - 4 - Classroom - 7 - Upside Down - 9 Far Gate

2 - Cafeteria - 10 - Run - 11 - Gym B

2 - Cafeteria - 10 - Run - 12 - Woods - 13 - Junkyard

2 - Cafeteria - 10 - Run - 12 - Woods - 14 - Byers 1 - 15 - Byers 2